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**Philadelphia Theatre Research Symposium 11th Annual Conference:
“New Plays and New Play Development”**

Keynote by Gavin Witt (Baltimore Center Stage)

First and foremost, many thanks for inviting us today, and to everyone here at Villanova particularly who helped make it happen—from tireless Elisa in the business office to Alexandra King for organizing and coordinating the whole shebang. From a scheduling and logistical standpoint, getting us here was at times worthy of a one-act drama all its own—maybe Beckett, or at least Ionesco—and we’re delighted that you stuck with it, and us, to ensure that we could be here today to start this conversation. Thank you for having us.

As a dramaturg and theater scholar myself, as well as representing Baltimore Center Stage, I’m thrilled to see this assemblage of academics, practitioners, and students (particular thrilled for the eager faces of this last group and the hope you offer for the future) gathered to consider so many facets of new play development: from questions of form and content to best—or at any rate current—practices, and of course the thriving local new play ecology of metro Philly. Such a fertile *terroire* you have here.

All of which, though, prompts for me a fairly fundamental question. Being a dramaturg by nature as well as by practice, it *has* to be a question!

Why new plays?

Why, to be more specific, write them, develop them, or produce them?

After all, some minimal and declining percentage of the civilian citizenry will even attend theater; this being an academic conference, I should cite some statistics, courtesy of the NEA’s most recent figures:

*Over the 10-year period 2002-2012 (and we know some of the challenges of that span!), overall attendance at "non-musical plays" declined, from 58.7 million to 42.1 million.

*Correspondingly, the percentage of "US adults" attending a non-musical play declined from 12.3% to a mere 8.3%, a trend reported to continue still.

*Predictably, participation in every age bracket from 18 upward also declined, some by as much as half—except for a 2.5% uptick in the 75+ crowd.

Given those numbers and that worrisome trend, then, surely there exist already more than enough plays produced or published to serve their needs. To say nothing of those plays now written but yet to premiere. Why would we need more?

And what awful odds for those aspirational scripts still awaiting the light of day? Or what chance for a second production lies ahead for those fortunate few afforded first productions? The numbers can look grim there too, all things considered. Especially if

you're a new playwright hoping to pay rent, or have—heaven forbid—health insurance. Let alone share your story. Live. On stage. For an audience.

Then we should also ponder, what will it have it taken to get to that point? What creative agonies or throes of creation on the part of playwrights over some 12-24 months, typically, if not longer, followed by the seemingly endless saga of revisions and rewrites and dramaturgical input popularly if euphemistically known as “Development Hell.” What revisions and permutations for the play; what tortured knots of introspective reconsideration tacked up on 3x5 cards or piled-up in versions in Final Draft for the writer; what gatherings of directors and actors and dramaturgs for hushed or hurried workshops, followed by discussions raucous or reverent. God Bless You Liz Lerman!

Indeed, as many, if not all, of you know too well, an entire industry has sprung up, of development centers and retreats like the Lark and Playwrights Center and New Dramatists and New Harmony and Sundance and InkWell; support systems like National New Play Network and its offshoot Script Exchange, like the New Play Map; as well as showcases and festivals like Sundance and NY Stage and Film and First Look, Colorado New Play Summit, and of course your own PlayPenn here in Philly; the Humana Festival and Pacific Playwrights Festival, Bay Area Playwrights Festival, Contemporary American Theater Festival.... Clearly, we are a festive bunch! And let's not forget the ancient mariner of them all, the O'Neill.

A (relatively) vast and impressive industry, truly—with feeder programs at universities and literary departments at LORT theaters bookending it. But is a best designed to serve arguably artisanal playwrights or their plays? Consider: What does it say about our relationship as gatekeepers or producers that the very vocabulary around the process of considering new work imposes a hierarchy of dominance: with due credit to the inimitable Brian Quirt of Toronto's Nightswimming, I call your attention (as he called mine) to the fact that we predominantly insist that playwrights submit to us. That's right: they submit their plays (and maybe themselves), contact us to submit, send in a submission...

It may be only semantics, but words do matter.

Even for a commission, it's a precarious proposition, an insecure dance towards an uncertain prospect. Consider the choreographer we recently collaborated with at Berkeley Rep's illustrious Ground Floor developmental retreat. There to assist us in exploring a new text on its feet, he was both amazed and horrified by the process. Write on spec? For a year or more? Often for a mere pittance if anything, and with no guarantee of production? “I don't set foot in a studio, or get on my feet to make a move, without money up front and a date certain for performance.” That may not be universal, but it was informative—a possibly healthy reminder of a potentially unhealthy dynamic we have helped foster.

But say you've solicited and sent around your play, and got a production scheduled. More rewrites or revisions at the behest of producers and directors. Actors weigh in

with their invaluable, inevitable two cents, before the critical community gets its say. All through what generally remains a relatively parched fiscal desert.

Nor is the terrain far less foreboding on the producing end. Dramaturgs devote hours, weeks, months or more to spelunking in the souls of playwrights, generally with good will and grace, largely for its own sake (rarely for the headline-grabbing share of recognition made unfortunately notorious in cases like *Rent*). Even after the expenditure of time and resources to develop a new play, often over years and through many workshops, most producing theaters of the regional non-profit world stand to make little if anything from producing a new play: at BCS over the last decade or more, a steady diet of premieres or at least recently new work have (with a few noteworthy exceptions) garnered at *best* half the revenue of even lesser-known established plays. Any exceptions tend to prove the rule.

So, again, why?

In a piece just published on HowlRound, Cynthia P. Schneider considers a recent global tour of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which travelled from Sweden to South Africa. While making a broader case for the role of theater, and the arts, in promoting cross-cultural understanding, Schneider notes specifically the powerful, immediate connection the revival managed to elicit, across boundaries of time and culture, wherever it played. She writes, "the words and the story created in 1959 by 29-year-old Lorraine Hansberry...sound intimately familiar to people in South Africa and Sweden today [and] *Raisin* confronted them, as it did and does American audiences, with uncomfortable truths, in the familiar context of a family drama."¹

Yet again, why would we need more? If 1959 speaks so powerfully to now.

In a raw, ruminative rallying call immediately after 9/11, a British theater critic (whose name I've unfortunately lost in the "mystic chords of memory", and whose essay I've been unable to locate in years of sporadic digging) confronted the question so many of us were then pondering: what profit theatermaking in the face of such seemingly wanton violence and hate? His response, to himself and to us, was: empathy. To hate, demonize, dehumanize, and ultimately slaughter thousands of strangers required, he observed, or at least relied on an utter absence of empathy of chilling proportions. This failure of empathy that allowed someone to fly a plane into a building could, he passionately argued, find its counter in the act of radical empathy engendered by theater. Not simply sympathy, nor understanding, but the living enactment and embodiment, before us, of the experiences, circumstances, and literal bodies of Others that we come to inhabit in the moment as if our own. Mimesis as morality. The *Un-verfremdungseffekt* that can save and salve us.

Schneider, similarly, goes on to observe, "Theatre cannot solve today's problems of division, terrorism, and extremism, but it can provide a first step by fostering an element all too often missing in domestic and international politics today: empathy.

Derek Goldman, Co-Director of the [Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics at Georgetown University], put it best, [Schneider writes,] ‘Theatre isn’t good at everything, but it can be spectacularly good at countering polarization through the empathy it enables in a live, communal setting, and through its capacity to humanize others.’”²

I see this radical empathy as doing more than humanizing others; rather, I understand it as more transformative for the audience. We take (with apologies to G. Wilson Knights and Charles Marowitz) a sort of "Gloucester's Leap" (after the illusory cliff conjured by Edgar in *King Lear* that becomes real for blind Gloucester and, by proxy, for us); or, like Miranda, find that we have "suffer'd with those we saw suffer." Surely, though, one can foster this same sense of empathy from encounters with Antigone, Medea, Electra, Rosalind, Viola, Hermione, Desdemona, Mary Stuart, Beneatha, Aunt Esther; arguably too while enjoying Gwendolyn and Cecily, Dolly Levi and Célimène, Mama Rose as much as Mother Courage.

All well and good. But is it enough simply to say, These plays were once new too? Enough as a basis on which to defend their sufficiency or absolute canonicity, or else necessarily enough on the merits to make a case for a "next generation." Is it really sufficient, given all the obstacles, impediments, or costs to say either "We have these plays, they do enough work" or in counter-argument, "But, we need the *new* Molière, Brecht, Pinter, Hansberry, Wilson, Stoppard, Williams, Churchill, Kane." What's past may be prologue, but surely we're not just recycling roles and recasting them.

To some extent, I find myself hearing here—even as I articulate it—more of a case for the second half of our "why new plays" question: for plays as such, for theater itself, rather than for the new particularly. So, maybe it's worth consistently considering "new" in a less literal and more radical understanding of our task, or challenge: to develop, and produce, plays that are, truly, New (not just new plays). New in form as much as content, as has been done from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Grotowski to Churchill to Ruhl, and from Mabou Mines to La Mama to SITI to Tectonic to Rude Mechs to Elevator Repair Service. And from truly new voices as well. New, say, in ways that Lorraine Hansberry was new back in 1959: rare in her politics and gender and sexuality, but radical (for Broadway) in her race—that is, novel in the given circumstances she brought to the dramaturgical table. New as an ever-expanding and diverse array of those with their own specific, particular given circumstances continue to offer, or demand. Plays, ultimately, that *do* something new, *say* something new, *show* us something or someone new, in a new way, from a new voice, with a new perspective, that makes us see or think or hear—ourselves, or others, or our world and our reality—in a new way. Something that can remake our perceptions can remake our minds; and to quote *Kinky Boots*, "You change the world when you change your mind."

That might be something like worth tackling.

1. Cynthia P. Schneider, "The Essential Truth of *A Raisin in the Sun* and Theatre in Our Time" HowlRound April 30, 2017

2. Ibid.